

Using Reading Logs for Business English

By Vicki Yung

Reading logs or reading response journals have been used widely in ESL courses to teach reading. The approach requiring students to record their reactions and questions following the reading of an authentic text is one way of integrating reading with writing.

Research in both L1 and L2 shows the effectiveness of using an interactive approach to reading instruction. (Carrell and Eisterhold 1983; Petrosky 1982; Swaffar et al. 1991; Zamel 1992). There is general agreement that the reader's active participation in organizing and evaluating information while reading a text is essential to reading comprehension.

Most ESL teachers use reading logs with novels or stories since the approach works well with literary texts. But the approach is also useful in ESP courses such as business English. In this article, I will discuss my experience with reading logs in an ESP course and the reactions of my students.

The Course and the Students

I incorporated reading logs in a course of English for economics and finance which focused on communication skills in an international business environment. One of the objectives of the course was to familiarize students with the terminology and the writing styles in written business communication. The strategy was to use authentic business magazines and journals instead of novels and short stories for a reading log activity to fulfill the content objectives of the course and give students the opportunity to develop reading, writing, and speaking skills in the register of English appropriate for business and commerce.

The approach was introduced to 67 first year, tertiary-level students, aged (19 through 22), majoring in Finance at the City Polytechnic of Hong Kong. They were divided into three groups, with approximately 22 students in each class. All of them spoke Cantonese as their first language and were at the intermediate level of proficiency in English. The students were required to attend the course two hours a week during a 15-week semester.

The Activity

The students were first required to read an article of their own choice from a list of business magazines and journals published in English and available in the library. These provided the stimulus for the students' reading logs.

English Language Journals on Business and Finance

- *Asia Money and Finance*
- *Asian Business*
- *Asian Wall Street Journal*
- *Asian week*
- *Banking and Finance (by Standard Chartered Bank)*
- *Business Week*
- *China Market*
- *China Trade*
- *China Trade and Development*
- *The Economist*
- *Far East Asia Review*
- *Far East Economics Journal*
- *Finance and Technology*
- *Financial Times*
- *Fortune*
- *Futures*
- *Hong Kong Standard (Newspaper)*
- *Marketing Week*
- *Newsweek (Business Section)*
- *Observer*
- *Securities Journal*
- *South China Morning Post (Business Post)*
- *Time (Business Section)*
- *Window*

Students were required to record a log of their reactions, questions and opinions about the article they read each week before class. During the class period, their reading logs were used for pair or whole-class discussion. For pair discussion, each student would read the other's entry and exchange views about their comments. For whole-class work, the teacher would raise one or two issues for fifteen minutes of open discussion.

The Reading Log

The goals of the reading log were to help students keep up with current issues in their field, prepare for class discussions and take notes for research papers. The reading log included three sections: a summary of the article, their response, and a vocabulary and structure section. In the summary section, the students were asked to summarize the article in less than 50 words. They were then to record their reactions and questions in the response section. In the last section, the students put down those vocabulary items and structures that were new to them. Each entry of the three sections was limited to one page.

The activity emphasized language fluency and critical thinking, with the students focusing on ideas instead of grammar. The teacher could check the students' work when they had class discussion each week, and the students got feedback from the teacher and their peers.

Students' Reactions to the Activity

At the end of the semester, I asked the students to fill out a questionnaire about the reading log activity. The questionnaire inquired whether the approach was helpful, in what ways it was helpful, and whether they had liked the activity. An analysis of their comments shows that they had a positive attitude towards the approach.

Over two-thirds of the students agreed that reading logs helped familiarize them with terms, issues, and writing styles in the field of business. The students' comments showed that the reading aspect of the activity was useful in improving their knowledge and business language. One student said, "Now I know more about the business field in the world," commenting further that the logs were meaningful and broadened his knowledge. Some students mentioned that this activity helped them to keep up with current issues in business. About 50% of them believed the activity helped their writing skills. One student said it helped train them to express their opinions in written form.

The students said they spent more time reading an article when they were required to write about it. Many of them (76%) felt that their understanding was enhanced after writing in their logs.

- *"The Reading Log pushes me to think deeply about the articles I read."*
- *"When I write about an article, I will think twice about what it said."*
- *"I want to have a thorough understanding of an article if I am going to write comments."*
- *"Writing clarifies about the meaning of an article."*

63% of the students indicated that they enjoyed the reading aspect of the activity, because they could personally select texts that interested them. Some 31% of the students liked the writing aspect because they could write about a topic that they liked. Some even said they had a chance to challenge the writer of the articles.

Many students noted that they enjoyed sharing their reading logs with a partner but only 37% said that they enjoyed discussing their logs in a whole-class discussion.

The students who enjoyed sharing their logs with a partner said that they liked it because they were exposed to a variety of topics in the field. The activity gave them a chance to practice their spoken English and share their ideas with the class.

The finance students were positive about the reading activity and the pair discussion, but were less positive towards writing and whole-class discussion. They reported being worried about grammar errors and the clarity of their ideas as they showed their log entries to their partners. They were also concerned about speaking English in front of the whole class.

- *"I'm afraid my point of view may be wrong or even crazy."*
- *"(My writing) may become a joke."*
- *"My classmates are not interested in my reading log."*
- *"I don't enjoy writing in the log because I may be wrong in my opinion."*

Evaluation

Most Hong Kong students started learning English when they were in kindergarten, but in spite of this long period of instruction, most have attained only an intermediate level of proficiency in English by the time they complete high school. English is rarely used outside the classroom, and students are reluctant to use it even there.

The driving force behind the reading log is that students have a choice in selecting reading materials. This free selection helps change their attitudes towards English.

Among the four skills, reading is the strongest for our students. They are more resistant to the productive skills of speaking and writing. But in using the reading log approach, they have a chance to read and write about topics that they are interested in before they have to talk about them in class. Linking their strongest skill, reading, with their weaker skills, writing and speaking, we are able to help them build confidence to use the language productively.

Reading logs were extremely effective for teaching vocabulary and specialized terms in context. In class discussions, students could get familiar with a range of lexis and concepts in the business field. On one occasion a student had read an article about the property market in Hong Kong, and during the class discussion some students indicated that they did not understand what "lease," "lessors" and "lessees" meant. This provided the opportunity for the student who read the article to explain these terms to the class.

On the negative side, class discussions were sometimes difficult because students did not all read the same article. Some students became frustrated when they shared favorite topics enthusiastically, but found the other students did not enjoy the discussion. It was also difficult to get a natural flow in discussion when unpopular topics were brought up, and topic-switching could embarrass the student who originally initiated the discussion.

Another problem was the difficulty in controlling the level of the materials. Some topics were interesting, but the language used might be too difficult for the students.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to illustrate how the reading log approach can be applied in a business English course. From the reactions of my students, I have found it a useful supplementary activity. The approach can be applied to other ESP courses since it helps prepare students for the language in their profession.

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References

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